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ABSTRACT

This study sought to describe public awareness, perceptions, concern and response to the phenomenon of mistreatment of older adults. The setting for the study was the classic community context of Middletown, U.S.A., Muncie/Delaware County, Indiana. Adults (N=400), selected by random digit dialing, were interviewed in November 1989. Subjects were asked about respect for older adults, mistreatment of the elderly, comparison of drug abuse and elderly mistreatment, the experience of elderly mistreatment and its reporting, and types of mistreatment. The results indicated that most of those surveyed felt that older adults did not get enough respect. Almost one-half felt that elder mistreatment was a serious problem in their area. Almost all felt that drugs were a more important problem in comparison to mistreatment. Those who had encountered or suspected a case of elderly mistreatment tended to feel that mistreatment was a serious social problem. Less than one-half of those who indicated awareness or suspicion of mistreatment reported to some authority. Lack of awareness of the state's Adult Protective Services Agency was apparent. (ABL)

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A Survey Analysis of Public Awareness, Perception, Concern, and Response to Mistreatment of Older Adults in Middletown, U.S.A.

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NATIONAL FORUM OF RESEARCH ON AGING 1990, SEPT 20
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, LINCOLN

A Survey Analysis of Public Awareness, Perception, Concern, and Response to Mistreatment of Older Adults in Middletown, U.S.A.

The principal focus of this discussion concentrates upon a descriptive analysis of public awareness, perceptions, concern and response to the phenomenon of mistreatment of older adults. The setting for the study is in the classic community context of "Middletown, U.S.A." (Muncie/Delaware County, Indiana).

As has been noted by Hoover, suffice it to say that older adults were almost absent in the Lynd's pioneering studies and almost as nonexistent in Caplow's Middletown III research (1982; 1983). Hence, it comes as no revelation that neither of these investigations examined the question of mistreatment of older adults.

It is not the purpose of this paper to document that a problem exists. While the dimensions of the issue may not be entirely agreed upon, there is probably little debate as to the existence of this rather significant social problem. The major thrust is an examination of the views, outlooks, degree of familiarity, and response to mistreatment of older Middletowners on the part of the general public. While community professionals, have been studied at some length (for recent examples see Anderson in Filinson and Ingman, 1989; Daniels, et al., 1989; or Blakely, et al., 1989), little has been done with regard to views and outlooks of the citizenry in general. Webster and O'Toole (1990) compared perceptions of college students and physicians, but almost nothing has been done as far as studies of public awareness, concern, and response based on large random samples. Without further ado, it is toward that end that we shall then proceed.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for the 1989 Middletown Area Survey which is conducted by Ball State's Department of Sociology, was selected by a computer routine which chooses telephone numbers in a distribution equivalent to the proportion of exchanges and blocks which are in the service area of Muncie and Delaware County. As previously noted, this comprises the boundaries of contemporary "Middletown, U.S.A." This variation of random digit dialing not only reflects a representative distribution of exchanges and blocks, but it precludes dialing numbers based on blocks which are not utilized by the phone company. One also makes contact with those whose phone numbers are unpublished or unlisted.

The data on which the following discussion is based were obtained from 400 telephone interviews conducted during the month of November, 1989, with respondents 18 years of age and older.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The age distribution of the sample ranges from 18 to 85 years of age; the mean is 44.2 years of age. Approximately 16 percent of the group is 65 or older.

About 30 percent of the sample have family incomes of $15,000 per year or less. Some 18.9 percent of those interviewed have family incomes of more than $50,000. The modal income category is $30,000-50,000 per year (22 percent).

With regard to education, the majority (45 percent) were at least high school graduates. Almost 14 percent had not completed a high school education, and 19 percent had completed a four year college degree or more.

Fifty-six percent of those responding are married; 9 percent are widowed; 14 percent are separated or divorced, and 21 percent have never been married. The female/male distribution is 54.2/45.8 percent, respectively.

OBSERVATIONS

We were interested in ascertaining some general sense of public "feelings" with regard to the position of older Middletowners. They were asked if, "Generally speaking, do you feel that older adults get too much, too little, or just about the right amount of respect from younger people these days?"

About 79 percent of the sample responded, TOO LITTLE. Nearly 18 percent felt it was about right and almost 3 percent didn't know. It is interesting to note in Table 1, that when we compare responses of those 65 and older to those younger than 65 (admittedly an arbitrary categorization), 51.7 percent of those 65 and older believe that there is too little respect in contrast to 87.6 percent who are "younger." Apparently older adults themselves are not overwhelmed by lack of respect.

(Table 1 About Here)

The sample was asked, "Some older people report that they are often taken advantage of because of their age. In your opinion, how serious is this problem in Muncie and Delaware County?" Of those responding, approximately 66 percent felt that it is somewhat serious or a very serious problem. When again compared by age (see Table 2), we find that 46.9 percent of those 65 and older respond in those terms as compared to 69.3 percent of those 64 and younger. Once more, the problem appears to be perceived with less gravity by older members of the community in contrast to their younger counterparts.

(Table 2 About Here)

The following passage was read to the respondent:
"We hear more and more about the mistreatment of the elderly by other people. I'm talking about such things as physical abuse, ridicule, threat, neglect, harassment, being bullied, and threatened, or having their money and possessions stolen or denied to them."

The respondents were then asked, "In your view, how serious is the problem of mistreatment of the elderly in Muncie and Delaware County?" Nearly 48 percent said, "somewhat serious" or

"very serious"; almost 25 percent responded "not too serious or "not serious at all." Table 3 compares reactions by the previously employed age breaks. Whereas 53.1 percent of the younger group responded on the "serious" side, only 24.6 percent of the older category so answered. It is worth noting that a much greater percentage of the older group (47.7 percent compared to 23.3 percent) were "not sure" on this issue.

(Table 3 About Here)

To obtain some perspective on the sense of concern, respondents were asked, "Which would you say is a more serious problem in Muncie and Delaware County; use of illegal drugs or mistreatment of the elderly?" The resounding response was illegal drugs, by 81.4 percent. In Table 4 we see that 70.8 percent of older adults cited drugs in contrast to 83.6 percent of those who are less than 65 years of age. The older age group is much less sure about the issue (16.9 percent) in comparison to those who are younger. (4.2 percent). Neither age group perceived mistreatment of elders to be as serious a problem as illicit drug usage.

(Table 4 About Here)

The sample was then queried regarding, "Have you ever encountered or suspected what you considered to be a situation of mistreatment of an older person?" The responses indicate that 14.2 percent (N=56) replied "yes"; 85.6 percent (N=338) replied "no." It may be worth noting at this point that 62.5 percent of those who had encountered or suspected a case of mistreatment felt that it is a somewhat or very serious problem in contrast to 46.0 percent of those who had no such experience. Direct experiences and harsh reality do seem to shape our perspective on the world.

Those who did respond in the affirmative were then asked about who was being mistreated. The responses can be seen in Table 5. It would appear women are the preponderant victims and around one-fourth of the 58 situations involved relatives of the respondent.

(Table 5 About Here)

We then inquired as to who was inflicting the mistreatment; responses to that inquiry may be examined in Table 6.

(Table 6 About Here)

Not too surprisingly, the majority of the mistreatment originated with those who are close to the older individual, i.e., relatives, friends, or neighbors. Social (and perhaps spatial) proximity does seem to create an atmosphere which is conducive to such behaviors under the "right" conditions.

Were these real or suspected instances of mistreatment reported to some authority? Of those who responded 41.2 percent (N=21) replied in the affirmative; 51.8 percent (N=30) said "no." Quite simply, a majority DID NOT make any kind of a report which might have resulted in an investigation and/or intervention in the possible mistreatment situation.

The types of mistreatment identified are seen in Table 7.

(Table 7 About Here)

Neglect and improper care rank first; verbal abuse is second; theft is third; and physical abuse is fourth. Only 42.1

percent (N=21) of those responding reported the situation to some authority.

To whom did they report the situation? As is noted in Table 8, most people contacted the police. In only one instance did the respondent contact Adult Protective Services; two people contacted Area 6 Agency on Aging, which would have placed them in communication with Adult Protective Services.

(Table 8 About Here)

Those who did not inform authorities of mistreatment were asked why they did not report the problem (see Table 9).

(Table 9 About Here)

One may note that the two predominant categories are: 1/ that the respondent was not sure if the problem was serious enough, and 2/ what might be charitably labeled as unspecific or ambiguous reasons (some might use the less magnanimous appellation, "lame excuse"), e.g., I forgot; didn't get around to it; too busy; I don't remember; etc. In three instances (10 percent), the respondent did not want to get involved.

What was the result of reporting the incident? Did it solve the problem? Fifty-seven percent (N=12) of those responding said "yes"; 43 percent (N=9) said "no."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND REMARKS

In summary, we see that while most of those surveyed felt that older adults do not get enough respect (one is tempted to label this the Dangerfield syndrome); this view is held by a far greater proportion of those under 65 years of age. While about two-thirds of the sample responded that taking advantage of older adults is in the serious range, again this was predominantly the case for those less than 65.

Almost half of those questioned state that elder mistreatment is a serious problem in the Middletown area; a far greater proportion of those under 65 supported this view. Just about everyone agreed that drugs are a more important problem in comparison to mistreatment.

Some 14 percent of the sample (N=56) have encountered or suspected a case of elder mistreatment. Those who have had such an experience also tend to feel that mistreatment is a serious social problem. Older women are most often identified as the victim, and the largest single group of mistreaters is family/relatives; if one includes friends and neighbors, this would account for 60 percent of the mistreatment. It is really not astounding that those who are closest often have the most opportunity or are placed in a situation which is very conducive to mistreatment of and older person. One is reminded of that gruesome little ditty:

"When I was a laddie
I lived with my granny
And many a hiding ma granny di'ed me.
Now I am a man
And I live with my granny
And I do to ma granny
What she did to me!"

The most common form of mistreatment identified by the sample is neglect or improper care, followed by verbal abuse, then theft and finally physical abuse.

A minority (41.2 percent) of those who indicated awareness or suspicion of a case of mistreatment reported it to some authority. By far and away, most who did make a report did so to the police. Only one respondent reported directly to Indiana's Adult Protective Services Agency. Even though Indiana has a rather comprehensive APS law (the state is divided into 19 APS units with 22 APS officers) which requires that a citizen report suspected case of adult abuse or neglect, apparently very few of the general public realize that the system exists. There is a statewide 1-800 number which puts one in direct contact with the Division of Aging. It appears that knowledge and awareness of this mechanism is sadly lacking.

Given the APS statewide budget of around $550,000, there is some concern that if the general public became aware of the "system" and started reporting on a large scale, APS might grind to a standstill due to lack of funds and personnel. Most of this budget must be expended on staff; very little is allocated for public awareness campaigns. Perhaps a classic example of "damned if you do and damned if you don't."

When asked why they did not make a report to some authority, the two predominant responses are, not sure of seriousness and other reasons, e.g., could not give a reason, forgot, too busy. The message here is that those who are mistreated cannot always rely on the good intentions and good will of others to make their situation known to someone in authority.

If a state's APS system is to be effective, those in the general public who are inclined to report abuse must have some awareness of that system and how to access it. Budgetary constraints are very real, but without an effective P.R. component, it may become just another example of a negative, self-fulfilling prophecy which fails to effectively address the problem and reinforces public cynicism and apathy?

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Table 1

Do Older People Get Enough Respect? By Age

	Respect		
Age	Too Little	About Right	N
18-64	283 (87.6%)	40 (12.4%)	323
65 and older	31 (51.7%)	29 (48.3%)	60
Total	314	69	383

$X^2 = 41.87$ d.f. = 1 Sig. = < .001

Table 2

Is Taking Advantage of the Elderly a Serious Problem?
By Age

	Seriousness of "Exploitation"					
Age	Very Serious	Somewhat Serious	Not Sure	Not too Serious	Not Serious At All	N
18-64	76 (22.6%)	154 (46.4%)	44 (13.3%)	51 (15.4%)	7 (2.1%)	332
65 and older	9 (14.1%)	21 (32.8%)	15 (23.4%)	16 (25.0%)	3 (4.7%)	64
Total	85	175	59	67	10	396

X^2 = 12.28 d.f. = 4 Sig. = < .05 > .01

Table 3

How Serious a Problem is Elder Mistreatment? By Age

	Problem of Mistreatment					
Age	Very Serious	Somewhat Serious	Not Sure	Not too Serious	Not Serious Not All	N
18-64	40 (12.2%)	134 (40.9%)	73 (22.3%)	66 (20.1%)	15 (4.6%)	328
65 and older	1 (1.5%)	15 (23.1%)	31 (47.7%)	15 (23.1%)	3 (4.6%)	65
Total	41	149	104	81	18	393

X^2 = 23.921 d.f. = 4 Sig. = < .001

Table 4

Is Drug Usage or Elder Abuse a More Serious Problem?
By Age

Age	Which is The More Serious Problem: Illegal Drugs	Both	Mistreatment of Elderly	Not Sure	N
18-64	276 (83.6%)	31 (9.4%)	9 (2.7%)	14 (4.2%)	330
65 and older	46 (70.8%)	6 (9.2%)	2 (3.1%)	11 (16.9%)	65
Total	322	37	11	25	395

$X^2 = 14.93$ d.f. = 3 Sig. = < .01 > .001

Table 5

Who Was Being Mistreated?

Who was mistreated?	N	Percent
Older woman (non relative)	26	44.8
Older man (non relative)	11	18.9
Older woman (relative of respondent)	13	22.4
Older man (relative of respondent)	2	3.4
Unspecified older relative of respondent	1	1.7
Uncertain	5	8.6
Total	58	

* While 56 persons knew of or suspected mistreatment, there were instances of being aware of more than one case or situation.

Table 6

Who Was Inflicting Mistreatment

Mistreated By	N	Percent
Son	3	5.7
Daughter	5	9.4
Both son and daughter	2	3.8
Son-in-law	1	1.9
Daughter-in-law	1	1.9
Husband	2	3.8
Miscellaneous relatives	6	11.3
Friend/neighbor	10	18.9
Staff in hospital/nursing home	6	11.3
Landlord	2	3.8
Brother-in-law	1	1.9
Business fraud/exploitation	3	5.7
Other (paper boys, delivery men, etc.)	7	13.2
The ubiquitous "does not know"	4	7.5
Total	53	

Table 7

Type of Mistreatment

Type	N	Percent
Physical abuse	8	14.5
Verbal abuse	12	21.8
Neglect/improper care	16	29.1
Threat/intimidation	2	3.6
Theft	10	18.2
Verbal abuse and neglect	1	1.8
Fraud, overcharging, exploitation	3	5.5
Other	1	1.8
Doesn't know	2	3.6
Total	55	

Table 8

To Whom was the Mistreatment Reported

Reported to:	N	Percent
Police	8	38.1
Welfare or other social agency	3	14.3
Adult protective services	1	4.8
Area 6 Agency or Aging	2	9.5
Physician	1	4.8
Member of abused's family	3	14.3
Other (friend, neighbor, etc.)	3	14.3
Total	21	

Table 9

Why Wasn't Mistreatment Reported

Reason for Non-Reporting	N	Percent
Did not want to get involved	3	10.3
Did not know how to report	1	3.4
Fear of reprisal on victim	1	3.4
Fear of reprisal on self	1	3.4
Not sure if it was serious enough to report	9	31.0
Thought someone else would report	3	10.3
Other reasons (often very ambiguous and uncertain--"I don't really know; could not give a reasons, etc.)	9	31.0
Not sure it was mistreatment	1	3.4
Husband reported it	1	3.4
Total	29	

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